

LINKAGE BETWEEN LEARNING STYLE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN NONFORMAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Taking into consideration travel as an experiential learning activity that can lead to adult's improved psychological well-being and increased life satisfaction; this paper describes a study of the relationship between learning styles and experiential learning in nonformal education. During a nonformal education trip, participants traveled to five locations in Brazil where they interacted with local people, observed the regions' ecosystem, and experienced local activities. Data results show that individuals scored high on the type of activities that were in agreement with their preferred learning style, based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning style model. When analyzing the relationship between the learning style inventory and learning activities, one might speculate that doers and feelers are more likely to participate in learning experiences through travel due to their interest in concrete experience and active experimentation. The results of this study can have practical implications in improving adults' quality of life and enhancing learning through travel by designing programs that provide a variety of activities that appeal to all learning styles.

Learning through Travel

Nonformal education is "any organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives" (Combs with Prosser & Ahmed, 1973, cited in Smith, 1996). Activities that are part of this definition include planned events organized by community groups, learning centers, churches, voluntary associations, or continuing education divisions in formal educational settings. Travel is one example of nonformal education that can impact a person's life through experiential learning.

Learning through travel can be placed in the category of experiential learning, as well as leisure and enrichment education. Experiential learning has been identified by Rogers (1969) as applied knowledge that addresses the needs and wants of the learner. Rogers recognizes four aspects of experiential learning: personal involvement, learner-initiated, evaluated by learner, and pervasive effects on learner as the qualities of experiential learning. Thus, experiential learning can be comparable to personal change and growth.

Leisure and enrichment education is referred to as education adapted to individuals. The purpose of leisure and enrichment education is to increase one's leisure time; enhance one's quality of life; and cultivate intellectual, emotional, physical, and social development (Worldwide Commission of Leisure Education, 2004). Studies that have addressed leisure and enrichment education from an adult education perspective have focused on the long-term effects of leisure education on a sense of independence and psychological well-being among the elderly (Searle, Mahon, Iso-Ahola, Sdrolas, & van Dyck, 1998), the relationship between schooling and work (Oakey, 1990), the social construction of leisure (Edwards & Usher, 1997), the impact of childhood leisure experience on adult leisure behavior (Yoesting & Burkhead, 1973), the link between adolescent leisure participation and involvement in similar leisure activities later in life (Scott & Willits, 1998), and employee development programs focusing on personal growth and self-esteem improvement (McKenzie & Hodge, 1999).

Individuals who participate in nonformal leisure and enrichment education may respond to or use stimuli in different ways (in the context of learning). A program may not always satisfy certain participants' learning needs depending on how the program is designed. Thus, understanding adults' learning styles and interests can help in the development of better programs. Studies on the relationship of learning styles and experiential learning in nonformal education do not exist in the literature. Studies that have attempted to address learning styles and experiential learning have focused on formal education settings. This paper describes a study on the relationship between learning style and experiential learning in nonformal education. The context of the study was a trip to Brazil.

The Context of the Learning Experience: A Trip to Brazil

During this nonformal education trip, participants traveled to five locations in Brazil where they interacted with local people, observed the regions' ecosystem, and experienced local activities. The team leader, the author of this paper and a native of Brazil, planned activities that provided experiential learning opportunities through sights, sounds, flavors, aromas, mysteries, celebrations, and adventures. Activities included greeting the New Year in the city of Rio de Janeiro, experiencing the fabled Amazon, exploring historic Salvador, absorbing the stunning sights of gigantic Iguaçu Falls, tasting the team leader's hometown, and visiting a native's home.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Style

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning style is founded on the idea that learning is grounded in experience. It places learners in a model characterized by a four-step process:

Feeling or Sensing (Concrete Experience). This represents learning that relies on feeling based judgments. People that score high in this learning style category tend to be empathetic, find theoretical approaches unhelpful, and prefer to treat each situation as a unique circumstance. They learn best from examples in which they can be involved and are inclined to relate to peers rather than authority. They are "people persons." Planned activities that apply learned skills are more suitable to this learning style. These learners fit the category of autonomous, self-directed learners. The instructor or facilitator should be more of a helper and coach.

Watching (Reflective Observation). This reflects a tentative, impartial, and reflective style of learning. Individuals that score high in this learning style category rely on careful observation in making judgments. Learning situations that involve the role of impartial objective observation such as lectures are more fitting for these learners because they are more visual and auditory, as well as introverted. The ultimate desire of these learners is for the instructor or facilitator to be a taskmaster, a guide, and to provide expert interpretation.

Thinking (Abstract Generalization or Conceptualization). This describes learners who are analytical; their conceptual approach to learning is based on logical thinking and rational evaluation. These individuals are oriented less toward people and more toward things and symbols. The best learning environment for these individuals involves authority-directed, impersonal learning situations emphasizing theory and systematic analysis. Unstructured discovery activities such as simulations and exercises are less than desirable. However, activities that involve case studies, theoretical readings, and reflective thinking can provide a more satisfying learning experience.

Doing (Active Experimentation). This learning style relies heavily on active experimentation. Individuals learn best when they can engage in projects, homework, or group discussions. Doers get frustrated with passive learning situations in which they are not involved (i.e., lectures). These individuals are very kinesthetic or tactile. Activities such as problem solving, small group discussions or games, peer feedback, and self-directed learning are suitable to these learners. These learners like to see everything and determine their own criteria for the importance of the information.

Methodology

Based on the premise that people learn from their experiences, an investigation was proposed to study the relationship between learning styles and experiential learning of adults who participated in a nonformal educational trip organized by a continuing education division in an institution of higher education. The initial assumption was that people with certain learning styles are more likely to enjoy particular activities. To study this issue, 18 people who participated in a 16-day trip to Brazil were asked upon their return to complete a survey questionnaire, and a learning style inventory based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory.

The Kolb-based learning style inventory was used to place learners in the following categories: Thinkers, Doers, Feelers, and Watchers. When answering the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 4 each of the activities they participated in or attended during each location of the trip (one being the most meaningful and four being the least meaningful). In the survey questionnaire, participants were asked to describe the activity that had the greatest and least impact on them in each location and explain why. In addition, respondents were invited to share the most significant experience during the whole trip.

Trip Participants

The trip participants, a diverse group of individuals ranging in age from 23-78, included students and community members from the Midwest area and across the United States. Of the 18 participants, 61 percent returned the survey (seven females, four males). Respondents worked in the fields of education, library science, law, research and development, and medicine. Sixty-four percent of these individuals were retired, 18 percent work full-time, and 18 percent work part-time.

Data Findings and Analysis

Learning Style Inventory Results

Of the 18 people, 11 completed the learning style inventory. Five individuals fall in the doer category, four individuals fall in the feeler category, one individual falls in the watcher category, and one individual falls in the thinker category.

Learning Activity Results

The trip provided a variety of activities that met the needs of participants' different learning styles, even though the trip planning was not geared to complying with those needs. For example, Table 1 shows the activities described by participants and their corresponding description according to Kolb's (1984) four-step process. The results from the survey questionnaire indicate that for the doers, the trip events with greatest impact were the ones that involved active experimentation, such as the jungle walk and viewing the Iguaçu Falls. For the feelers activities that involved receptive activity on feeling based on judgment were the ones that most impacted them. These activities included meeting interesting people and sharing time

together; realizing the richness of Brazil's natural resources and cultural differences; comparing language, geography, people, culture, and history within Brazil to experiences in other Latin American countries, and "The Amazon! Concern for the world environment," as one respondent stated. The watcher provided a reflective observation of the trip's biggest impact by saying, "Every place was interesting and significant to better understanding the world and its people, but if I could only go one place in Brazil, I would choose the Amazon." The thinker provided an analytical explanation of what was most impactful, "I liked being in the jungle even though it was very civilized. It fulfilled all those dreams initiated by books and movies."

Concrete Experience	Reflective Observation	Abstract Conceptualization	Active Experimentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visit to: Favela da Rocinha, Corcovado, Sugar Loaf, Iguaçu Falls, Native's House, Meeting of the Waters, Gramado, local village - Meeting local people - Jungle trek - Swimming in the river - City Tour - New Year's Eve Dinner with Group - Lunch/Dinner at local restaurant - Alligator spotting - Piranha fishing - Canoeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local culture to see how people existed in the jungle - Walking on the beach on the "patterned" walkway - Learning about different plants, trees, and insects and observing their characteristics - Lodge: walking in the jungle canopy - City tour: impact of African culture in Brazil - Visit to a native's house to see where one lives in another country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being on the beach on New Year's Eve - The importance of the different locations visited - Seeing the positive in an experience that had the least impact - Comparing where one lives to the locations visited and seeing the importance of the location to the world survival - Contrasting slavery and colonialism in Brazil and USA. Noticing the differences in "mixed blood" and contrasting it in terms of culture issues - Identifying how the visit provided a better understanding of the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experiencing people first hand - Jungle trek and trip to local villages/families to reiterate the point that there are parts of the world that aren't significantly modernized and they still exist without it - Eating the local food - Attending a presentation and being involved in it through questions - The New Year's Eve experience with the group and throwing flowers on the sea - Seeing the tree canopy and seeing people living there - Watching and participating in a dance/capoeira show on the island and in the market - The raft trip going underneath the water falls - Visiting a place where a native lives and experiencing local refreshments - Staying in a lodge in the Amazon - Viewing the falls and going through the walkways

Table 1

Data Analysis

When contrasting the results of the learning style inventory with the activities that were preferred or had the greatest impact on the participants, the findings correspond with the four-step process of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning style model. When looking at the results of the learning style inventory and learning activities, one might speculate that doers and feelers are more likely to participate in learning experiences through travel due to their interest in concrete experience and active experimentation. It is important to note that in this sample the watcher and the thinker were travel partners of a doer and a feeler respectively. One limitation of this study is that the sample size is too small and impracticable to generalize. However, the design

of the study may be used as a model for other studies or repeated in future programs offered by continuing education divisions of higher education institutions.

Implications for the Practice of Adult and Continuing Education

Linking learning styles and experiential learning with nonformal education settings can provide new insights to the practice of adult and continuing education when developing travel-related activities for adults. Feedback from participants can help create programs that include a variety of activities that are appealing to all learning styles. These activities may be presented to prospective adult learners (travelers) before leaving for the trip. Also, trip leaders or facilitators may ask participants to complete a learning style inventory before the trip in order to provide additional opportunities for experiential learning that may occur during the trip.

Further, understanding adults' learning styles and interests can help in the development of better travel programs. This study can have practical implications for those planning non-degree programs for adults and educators that work as guides or facilitators during trips. According to Rogers (1969), all human beings have a natural propensity to learn. However, individuals have a tendency to score high in areas that favor their learning style. Yet it does not mean that individuals only learn from one type of experience. Actually, the ideal learning environment should provide experiences that include all four processes described by Kolb (1984), with the flexibility of allowing the learner to spend additional time on the preferred learning activity. In this case, the role of the instructor is to facilitate such learning by setting a positive climate for learning; clarifying the purposes of the learner(s); organizing and making available learning resources; balancing intellectual and emotional components of learning; and sharing feelings and thoughts with learners without dominating (Rogers, 1969).

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